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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000292

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#) [HUMRIT](#)  
SUBJECT: GOB TIGHTENING CLAMP ON PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS

Classified By: CDA Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (SBU) The GOB Civil Service Bureau (CSB) announced that it is not prepared to tolerate the establishment of unions formed in government ministries and other government entities. It calls these unions illegal and has instructed government bodies to prevent them from forming. At the center of the debate is an article of the Trade Union Law of 2002, which appears to specify that civil servants are permitted to participate in unions, but not establish unions within government organizations. Two leaders of groups have reportedly been questioned at length about their union involvement by officials from the CSB. A panel of representatives from five public sector unions announced that as of March 15, over 10,000 civil servants had signed a petition calling for a 25% pay increase. There is an indication that the CSB, under instruction from the Prime Minister, is taking action on a salary increase for some government employees, but it is unclear how soon the move would become effective. End summary.

12. (SBU) The CSB circulated a memorandum March 19 to all ministries and other government entities ordering action to stop union activity by groups in the public sector. (Note: This does not apply to state-owned companies like Gulf Air and Alba, where unions are permitted to operate.) The memorandum from CSB president Ahmed Bahr labeled the organizations illegal and directed government ministries and commissions to prevent them from forming. Government sources point out that the Trade Union Law of 2002 does not permit public sector workers to establish unions in government ministries/organizations, even though it permits them to join them. Further, a CSB memorandum circulated in early 2003 clarified the language in the law, clearly prohibiting government employees from forming unions.

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Hardball Tactics  
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13. (SBU) Public sector union sources told the press March 21 that the CSB and the Cabinet's Legal Affairs Directorate had formed a joint committee to monitor government unions and their leadership. The sources claimed that the committee had opened an investigation of the head of the joint Postal Service and Civil Aviation Authority union Jamal Ateeq, who is also assistant secretary general for public sector unions

at the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU). The committee reportedly informed Ateeq that it could file a legal case against him for violating Civil Service regulations. The head of the union in the Ministry of Electricity and Water (MEW) announced March 24 that an attorney from the CSB and an official from the MEW legal affairs department had interrogated him for four hours. Both the Cabinet Legal Affairs Directorate and the CSB have publicly denied the existence of an investigatory committee.

14. (SBU) Seven public sector union groups have been formed, but only five have rallied in support of a recent call for a salary increase: unions at the Ministry of Electricity and Water, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Interior, and the joint union of employees from the Postal Service and the Civil Aviation Authority. Article ten of the Trade Union Law of 2002, which legitimizes unions, says, "Workers have the right to organize trade unions in any establishment or sector, or in any specific activity, or industry, or in professions that are interconnected based on this law, and the employees of the Civil Service system have the right to join." The GOB has consistently argued that although civil servants are given the right to join unions, the law does not give them the right to establish their own unions within government entities.

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Signing for Support  
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15. (SBU) The public sector unions began calling for a raise in the government sector minimum wage after a February 4 meeting at the Federation. They demanded a raise from the current BD 200 to at least BD 300 to keep pace with rising consumer prices. Several days later, the five unions

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announced that they had formed a panel, consisting of representatives from each of the unions, to develop an action plan. The panel announced shortly thereafter that it had drawn up a petition asking for a 25% pay increase and that it had already attracted 500 government employees to sign the petition. As of March 15, public sector union leaders claimed that the petition had drawn the support of more than 10,000 government workers from approximately 38,000 total in Bahrain.

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Teachers, Human Rights Activists Join the Discussion  
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16. (SBU) Mahdi Abudeeb, president of the Teachers Society, a professional organization and not a union, announced March 6 that 3,000 primary and secondary public school teachers had signed a petition calling for a 20% rise in their salaries. Teachers are also reportedly dissatisfied with the recruitment process and school administration, and are urging the Ministry of Education to reform. Abudeeb, who ran for parliament in the 2006 elections but was defeated, said that teachers have not received any pay increases since 1997. The Teachers Society will reportedly send the petition to the Prime Minister, the Crown Prince, the Council of Representatives, and to the Shura Council. According to Ministry of Education statistics from academic year 2005-2006, there were approximately 10,800 public school teachers.

17. (SBU) Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) released a press statement March 29 urging the CSB and other government entities to recognize government workers' right to organize. The statement characterized the CSB's interpretation of Article ten of the Trade Union Law as "strange and the first of its kind," saying that it is not in line with international labor standards. BHRS stressed that the unions' activities to press for a salary increase are legitimate under the constitution, and measures taken against

these activities are a violation of a fundamental human right. BHRS called on the government to stop harassing union leaders by questioning them and threatening them with further action, and announced its support to the GFBTU in its complaint to the International Labor Organization's Trade Union Freedom Committee.

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Message Heard?  
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18. (SBU) CSB president Bahr announced March 15 that the CSB was already taking the necessary steps to give civil servants on the specialist scale (including managers and mid-level technocrats) a 15% raise in their salaries. In addition, Bahr said that the Prime Minister had asked the CSB to look at providing an increase to those on the general salary schedule (clerks, drivers, etc.) as well, reaching as many as 18,000 public sector workers. He added that a new schedule would be introduced to increase the payout for employee overtime. Assistant Undersecretary of Finance Arif Saleh stated in the press that salary increases are not included in the 2007/2008 budget, but other financial sources could be used to cover the increases.

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Comment  
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19. (C) The last several weeks have seen an escalation in the rhetoric between the government, leaders of the public sector unions, and the GFBTU. The reported questioning of the union leadership represents a show of force from the government, but the GOB has denied that these activities are taking place. If the government follows through on steps to raise government worker salaries, this will give the public sector workers, and the GFBTU behind them, a boost in confidence that their recent tactics have been effective. However, even if the GOB bends on salaries, it is unlikely to change its policy in the near term on recognizing the right for public sector workers to form their own unions within ministries.

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